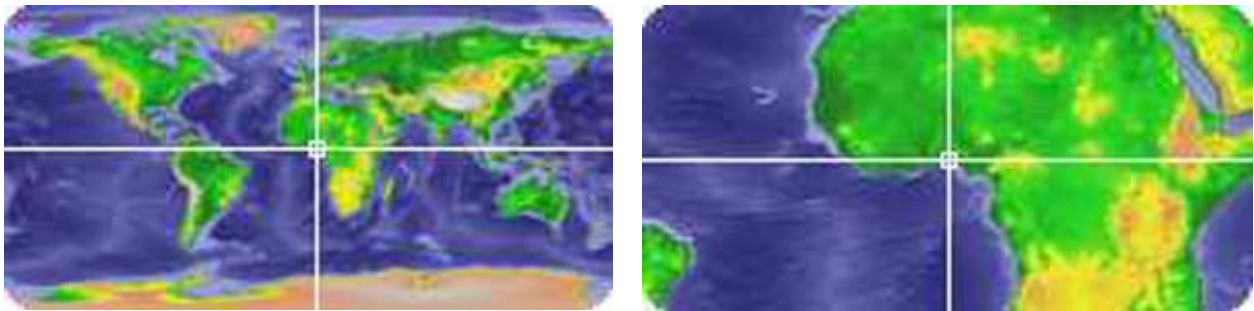




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Cultural Heritage Resources of the New Oyo Empire, Southwestern Nigeria: Prospects for Sustainability

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Abstract

In this project I employed a multidisciplinary approach involving ethnographic and reconnaissance surveys to investigate, identify, and classify potential New Oyo empire sites as cultural heritage resources. The New Oyo empire was located in southwestern Nigeria about 130 km south of the Old Oyo, and 55 km north of Ibadan. Following the decline of the Old Oyo empire in 1837 the New Oyo developed and shared similarities with facets of the Old Oyo. Yet, the New Oyo empire was distinct from its predecessor as a result of environmental changes, relocation, and shifts in urbanization. My work here reveals that a number of the cultural heritage resources of Yoruba-speaking people and the New Oyo empire have not been investigated or otherwise suffer neglect. This study therefore identifies and classifies a number of cultural heritage resources of the New Oyo with a desire of showcasing such sites as important heritage resources within Nigeria. These cultural heritage resources can play important roles in our current engagement with the history of Nigeria as impacted by the trans-Atlantic slave trade over several centuries.

Introduction

Public engagement and interpretation of cultural heritage resources in West Africa have become important elements in a fast-growing sector of international commemoration and tourism focused on areas impacted by the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Dallen and Gyan, 2009). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) established the “Slave Route Project” in 1993 to promote increased understanding of the impacts, causes, and effects of slavery’s destructive legacies over time (UNESCO, 1993). In this perspective,

UNESCO views the slave trade as a form of globalization that caused dramatic cultural, economic, and social changes that impacted many African societies.

Cultural heritage resources include interactions with, and interpretations of, the beliefs, practices, and cultural expressions of existing social groups and their inheritances from the past through their tangible and intangible expressions. The intangible heritage elements addressed in this project included music, dance, language, religion, foodways, and festivals of the Old and New Oyo Empires. The prominence of intangible cultural resources was advanced significantly by UNESCO starting in 2003. At that time, UNESCO issued the “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,” which seeks to protect and conserve the diversity of cultural traditions worldwide. That Convention was ratified and took effect in 2006 (UNESCO, 2003, 2006). Earlier efforts to protect the cultural heritage of societies across the globe had focused primarily on material (tangible) expressions, such as monuments, the built environment, architecture, and smaller-scale art works (Ahmad, 2006). The tangible (material) aspects of the New Oyo empire that constitute cultural heritage resources include monuments, historic public buildings, homes, farms, castles, cathedrals, museums, and archaeological ruins and associated relics (Dallen and Gyan, 2009).

Most of the previous investigations of Oyo history focused on the Old Oyo empire, including studies by Clapperton (1929), Clarke (1938b), Walters (1954), Willet (1960), Agiri (1975), Sowunmi (1979), Soper and Darling (1980), Agbaje-Williams (1983), Soper (1993), Aremu (2000), Folorunso et al. (2006), and Olukole (2008b). Despite these works, there is still a scarcity of information pertaining to the New Oyo. Accordingly, there is a need to document the cultural resources of the New Oyo and their prospects for sustainable cultural tourism and commemoration. This work therefore recommends a sustained development of Nigeria’s cultural heritage that involves host community participation conservation and the application of research findings.

The vitality of the Old Oyo empire until the late 18th century was attributed to the effective rule of an *Alaafin* named *Sango*. The *Alaafin* served as the supreme judge within the Oyo empire. His was the final court of appeal, and he often represented a sense of sodality and honor for the people through intertwined roles of administering law, governance, and resolutions of equity (Salami, 2006). *Sango* was a descendant of Oranmiyan, who was, in turn, a descendant of Oduduwa, a founding figure among the Yoruba people (Yahaya, 2010). As such, *Sango* in

Yoruba history and tradition was held in high esteem, and the importance of Sango can be observed in the shrines of both the Old and New Oyo empires. The expansion of the Old Oyo empire met with resistance in the 14th century from the Borgu and Nupe polities, who feared that Oyo might take a strategic position in the trans-Saharan trade to their detriment (Okpoko, 1998). With conquest and expansion of the Oyo empire between the 15th and early 19th centuries, the Oyo became one of the largest polities in Africa, covering most of the region encompassed by Yorubaland, the Benin Republic, and Togo (Oguntomisin, 2002). Although political power within the Old Oyo empire was broken by the Fulani Jihad war of the 19th century, the New Oyo kingdom remains a salient point of historical reconstruction and preservation of modern cultural heritage. The construction and layout of the New Oyo kingdom are to much extent a similitude of the Old Oyo empire. However, with colonization and industrialization, cultural values and practices also shifted to create distinct facets of the New Oyo empire (Olukole, 2009).

In the Yoruba tradition, great importance is attached to the first son of a king, popularly referred to as “Aremo Oba.” The first son is honoured as the heir to the seat of his father. He is given much honour and power among the subjects of the king in the traditional Yoruba kingdom. In the New Oyo, however, the Aremo’s seat no longer existed (Ogunmola per comm., 2008); therefore, his house lies abandoned. This abandonment could explain the still-standing ruins of the mud house, known as the Aremo house in the Old Oyo. These ruins of this packed earth house reveal the type of architecture that characterized settlements of the ancient Oyo. According to Watters (1954), the Aremo’s packed earth house of the Old Oyo was probably reinforced with palm oil which served to “water-proof” the materials against rain. This view is corroborated by the findings of Irvine (1969) about shea butter (*Butyrospermum paradoxum*) and palm oil (*Elaeis guineensis*) being used as water proofing substances in the construction of packed earth houses, thereby reducing surface erosion of the walls. This use of shea butter or palm oil probably accounts for durability of mud walls in the humid tropical environment of Nigeria.

It is worth noting that most of these packed earth houses that characterised ancient Yoruba architecture have today been replaced by structures made of concrete. Many of today’s town halls, meetings places, and compounds (known in Yoruba as “Agbo-Ile”) are now built using modern concrete, but remain in a replicated settlement pattern as that of the Old Oyo. The New Oyo compound, consisting of the palace and the Akesan market, are located in the central part of Oyo town. Opposite the New Oyo palace stands the Old Oyo palace (Figure 1) said to be

constructed by Atiba Abiodun, the ruling Alaafin who founded the New Oyo, known as “Agodi Oyo,” between 1837 and 1838. The palace at the New Oyo, like the Old Oyo, is surrounded by a perimeter wall. However, the Old Oyo palace was approximately six times the size of that of the New Oyo. This New Oyo compound and courtyard system is a basic and traditional Yoruba arrangement involving a group of households (Agbaje-Williams, 1983). The compound system consists of a house or compound of many rooms, each inwardly facing a large open courtyard (Aina, 1989). As for the palace area and gates, they are all replicated in the New Oyo while the tradition of locating the Akesan market in close proximity to the king’s palace was also upheld in the New Oyo. The closeness of both the old and new Akesan markets to the king’s palace is typical of what obtains in all Yoruba towns (Mabogunje, 1962; Ojo, 1966).



Figure 1. First (Old) palace of the New Oyo empire (all images by author).

Within the New Oyo palace complex there is an inner gate that encloses the king’s court. At this entrance there are several works of art, such as wood carvings typical of Yoruba royal palaces (Figure 2). Within the palace are rooms known as *ode*. The *ode* provide residential space for the king’s attendants and representatives, the king’s trumpeters, the king’s guests and the head of the king’s slaves or *mapenpa*. Some other buildings lie southwest of the palace. Other rooms within the Oyo palace include Ile Igba, Adodo Kekere, Ile Imole, Ilesanyin, Inaso, Adodo, Ile Ori, Olorunkumefun, Iyake, Ile omokunrin, Oriloye, and Ita Ile loke. Within the palace area of the modern Oyo is a museum which houses art and craft works typical of both the New and Old Oyo empires.



Figure 2. The New Oyo palace entrance.

Materials, Methods, and Survey Findings

I conducted reconnaissance surveys of the New Oyo palace area in an attempt to identify and classify potential cultural heritage resources. Investigators walked across the area of study using a random sampling technique involving the collection and recording of artifacts and their locations. This method gave us a wide-area view of the cultural features of the New Oyo and enabled for the classification of the features. With the aim of updating the cultural history and other viable information of the New Oyo, we utilized ethnographic studies assisted by key informants. We conducted oral history interviews on a one-on-one basis to record important information about the cultural heritage sites of the New Oyo. Most of the informants were elderly persons who were residents of the area studied.

The oral interviews and archaeological surveys revealed several important cultural heritage resources of the New Oyo. Through our interpretation two classes of the cultural resources were obtained, consisting of both tangible and intangible elements of heritage of the New Oyo. These included: (1) tangible facets of the New Oyo, such as the Palace area, Akesan market, Aremo's house, the Art Museum and the Town Hall; and (2) intangible resources of the New Oyo, including palace drumming, praise songs, and folklore tales.

Akesan Market. As in the case of Old Oyo, the Akesan market or "King's market" is replicated in the New Oyo for culture continuity. Today, merchants from neighbouring towns

bring their wares to the market. Such goods sold here include food stuffs, traditional clothing, and farm implements.

Town Hall. To the east of the modern palace lies what was once the courtyard. Today the courtyard is used as a royal reception hall. The well-crafted wooden doors and throne seat (Figure 3) within this building show various depictions of both animals and humans with the inscription *Teleda lase* (“authority belongs to the Creator”) and the figures “2.3.71,” likely referring to March 2, 1971 as the date of installation.



Figure 3. Traditional seat and wooden door carvings of the New Oyo empire.

Art Museum. As a way of preserving cultural history and material, art works were displayed and interpreted in the museum within the palace. Displayed art works include pottery, *adire* textiles, clay figurines, sculptors, and wood carvings, among other items (Figure 4).

Palace Drummers. Drumming is one of the most significant forms of communication and expressive culture for the modern Oyo. Drumming within the palace is a royal privilege and shows the cultural continuation of practices of the Oyo empire. At the entrance of the old palace is the *Oju Aganju*, which served as the waiting hall of chiefs during coronation and other activities. East of the *Oju Aganju* is the *Gbedu* where every Friday royal drummers play for the king. This practice, according to the royal drummers, is undertaken in observance of royal rites as was done within the Old Oyo empire. The drummers are of the lineage of *Ayan*. It is



Figure 4. Some artifacts in the New Oyo Palace Museum.

generally believed that the first Yoruba drummer was a man named Ayangalu (Omojola, 2010). For this reason, members of Yoruba drumming families often bear names that begin with Ayan, a prefix of Ayangalu. Examples of such names are Ayantunde (Ayan returns), Ayanleke (Ayan is victorious/overcomes) and Ayanyemi (Ayan is good for me). But the significance of Ayangalu goes beyond its role as a means of solidifying ancestral and vocational identity. Ayangalu is also regarded as the deity spirit of the drum and a guardian spirit for all drummers (Euba, 1990). Present day Yoruba drummers often bear titles that speak to a sense of status within this line of heritage, such as Otun onilu Alaafin (the right hand king drummer), Eketa onilu Alaafin (the third king drummer), and Ekerin Onilu Alaafin (the fourth king drummer) (Figure 5).

Today, drumming is considered to be passing cultural heritage messages as in ancient times, although their relevance has dissipated and become more a matter of aesthetic entertainment. The palace drummers play a significant role in communicating to the king within the palace environment and during events. Such communication could be to herald the arrival of a visitor, the arrival of a particular chief or important dignitary. They serve as the king's agents in alerting the king of impending danger or fortune by the various compositions they produce. This tradition, according to the drummers, is ancient and particularly important as they are also the first to get to the palace to wake the king up with their drum beat in an effort to boost his

morale in ruling the Oyo kingdom each day. Some of these drums include the Iya Ilu, Gangan, and Kanango.



Figure 5. Traditional drummers of the New Oyo empire.

Concluding Observations and Implications

This work has identified a decline of cultural heritage resource preservation over time. To circumvent this decline there is a need in Nigeria for critically examining the long term benefits of sustainable cultural heritage resources. The cultural norms and values associated with the Oyo empire still remain. Yet, without funding and support for research and preservation, such material and intangible traditions may be forever lost. We cannot afford to allow their extinction. The cultural heritage resources of Old and New Oyo empires must be preserved to allow for full realization of their social and commemorative potentials.

Note

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